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Max Ko-wu Huang, The Meaning of Freedom: Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism.

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1 Since being introduced into China in the late nineteenth century, liberalism has had a contentious relationship with the authoritarian state. At best, it has served as an alternative to the ruling ideology (e.g., the Chinese Democratic League in the 1940s); at worst, it has been a target of political campaigns to crack down on opposition (e.g., the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the 1950s and the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalism Campaign in the 1980s). In modern Chinese political discourse, liberalism (*ziyou zhuyi*) is like a ghost that haunts China's political leaders without having any direct impact on policies. For students of modern Chinese political thought, it is puzzling that although liberalism is often used as a yardstick for measuring the progress of Chinese political modernity, it has failed to take root in China.

2 Max Ko-wu Huang has been a leading expert on Chinese liberalism over the last 15 years. Rather than taking the conventional view that liberalism does not suit Chinese political culture, he seeks to explain the failure of Chinese liberalism by examining the process by which liberalism was introduced into the country. In his first book, *Yige bei fangqi de xuanze: Liang Qichao tiaoshi sixiang zhi yanjiu* (*The Rejected Path: A Study of Liang Qichao's Accommodative Thinking*, 1994), he argues that since the turn of the twentieth century, mainstream Chinese intellectuals have rejected the gradual, accommodative, liberal approach to politics in favour of radical and revolutionary political ideologies (such as fascism and communism) to drastically overhaul Chinese political institutions. This sombre view of the fate of Chinese liberalism continues in Huang's second book, *Ziyou de suoyi ran: Yan Fu dui Yuehan Mier ziyou zhuyi sixiang de renshi yu pipan* (*The Raison d'être of Freedom: Yan Fu's Understanding and Critique of John Stuart Mill's Liberalism*, 1998). Based on a careful comparison of Yan Fu's translation with John Stuart Mill's original writings, Huang concludes that Yan (the first major Chinese liberal thinker) had a deep appreciation of Mill's notions of liberty and individuality, but that his understanding of

liberalism was coloured by traditional Chinese learning. Missing Mill's epistemological pessimism, Yan could not develop an appreciation of Mill's argument for protecting individual rights from government intervention. It is this lack of interest in "negative freedom," Huang argues, that has led to the demise of liberalism as a viable political ideology in modern China.

3 In his new book, *The Meaning of Freedom: Yan Fu and the Origins of Chinese Liberalism*, Huang not only re-states his main argument from *Ziyou de suoyi ran* for English readers, but also further explains what he considers to be the causes of the failure of Chinese liberalism. Huang opens *The Meaning of Freedom* with a detailed discussion of the historiography of Yan's life and thought, along with up-to-date information about the scholarship on Yan. More important, as Thomas Metzger points out in his preface, Huang's historiographic discussion is "to identify the significant issues left unresolved by this voluminous, confusingly complex literature," thereby laying out the main argument in the rest of the book (p. xv). The main argument that Metzger refers to is Huang's finding that "not one of Yan Fu's long line of Chinese critics noticed the divergence between Yan Fu's epistemological perspective and that of the key western liberal text he translated, J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*" (p. xv).

4 Philosophically speaking, the epistemological divergence lies in Yan's optimism about the perfectibility of human beings through education and moral cultivation, and Mill's pessimism about the human propensity for taking selfish actions to protect one's interest. Politically speaking, the epistemological divergence appears in Yan's preference for promoting "positive freedom" by giving the government the central role in moulding society, and Mill's predilection for protecting "negative freedom" by stopping the government from intervening in private life. This epistemological divergence between Yan and Mill becomes the theme that runs through the rest of the book. The divergence first appears in Chapter Two, where Huang traces Yan's chequered pursuit of a synthesis of Eastern and Western political philosophies to solve the domestic and foreign problems of late Qing China. The divergence emerges again in Chapter Three, where Huang discusses Yan's creative interpretation of Mill's *On Liberty* as a "realization of a Confucian balance between self and group and the ability of a nation to succeed in a Darwinist struggle for survival" (p. 151). Finally, in Chapter Four, the divergence forms the bedrock for Huang's assessment of Yan as a political thinker who mixed Mill's liberalism with Confucian morality.

5 By highlighting the epistemological divergence between Yan and Mill, Huang casts a new light on the Chinese translator. In addition to introducing Western liberal thought to Chinese readers, Huang sees Yan as "a political thinker operating at an intercultural junction" who both adopted and rejected "beliefs deeply rooted in the two intellectual traditions making up that junction" (p. 353). This new image of Yan drastically changes our view of Chinese liberalism. First, the new image of Yan directly challenges Benjamin Schwartz's assertion that liberalism was intimately tied to nationalism from the day it was introduced to China. Contrary to Schwartz, Huang considers Yan an ardent supporter of liberalism who had no intention of subjugating the self to the society, the private to the public, and the citizen to the nation. On this score, Yan was evidently a champion of what Huang calls "Millianism." In particular, Yan believed in the separation of individual freedom, political power, knowledge, and morality, as opposed to the fusion of the four realms in Rousseauism (pp. 47-51). With Yan's

"Millianism" as an example, Huang shows that despite failure and setbacks, Chinese liberals are fervently devoted to building a democratic society in China.

6 Second, the divergence between Yan and Mill indicates a distinctive path that the Chinese liberals undertook in embracing liberalism. Instead of building a political structure that would protect individual rights based on the notion of "negative freedom," Chinese liberals focused on creating a liberal government to change the behaviour of its citizens. Thus, the goal of Chinese liberals was to create a democratic society "based on the 'positive freedom' of individuals freely pursuing their personal interests only after an education guided by an enlightened elite has instilled virtue and wisdom into them, making them altruistic and patriotic" (p. xxiii). As we can imagine, it is by no means easy to synthesise the "inner" moral values of the Confucian elite with the "outer" institutions of Western liberalism. Part of the difficulty, as Huang rightly points out, is that the combination of an enlightened tutelage with the protection of individual rights has no precedence in either Eastern or Western tradition. To make matters worse, the elitist approach of Chinese liberalism was deemed too "accommodative, gradualist" to solve the pressing problems plaguing China since the beginning of the twentieth century. For these reasons, Huang writes:

7 All in all, the modern Chinese intellectual mainstream has diverged from Millianism not only in questioning the extent to which Millianism emphasized the freedom and rights of the individual but also in failing to grasp the deep connection between this emphasis and epistemological pessimism. In both these ways, Yan's thought was typical of this mainstream. (p.62)

8 Notwithstanding the new perspective he offers on Yan Fu, Huang exaggerates his role in Chinese liberalism. Taking the classical liberal thoughts of the Victorian Age as the standard of Western liberalism, Huang presents a simplistic picture of Chinese liberalism as a battle between the "accommodative, gradual" approach of Millianism and the "radical, revolutionary" approach of Rousseauism. In so doing, he reduces the complex history of Chinese liberalism into a choice between protecting negative freedom (as in Mill) and advancing positive freedom (as in Yan). Certainly, this trope of choosing between two alternative models highlights Yan's contribution as an original thinker who creatively combined Mill's liberalism with Confucian morality based on an epistemological optimism. Yet, it also obscures the momentous changes in both Western liberal thought and Chinese liberalism since World War I.

9 As Edmund Fung points out, the catastrophe of the war revealed the horrendous social injustice and brutal exploitations of "organized capitalism."[1] Since the 1920s, Western liberals (e.g., Harold Laski) had been determined to find a "middle ground" between democracy and socialism. Post-war liberals shifted their attention from protecting individual rights to creating what is commonly known as "social democracy," a benevolent and caring government that would provide protection and services to the poor and disenfranchised. It was in this context that many Chinese liberals between the two world wars (e.g., Zhang Junmai, Zhang Dongsun, Luo Longji, Wang Zaoshi, and Chu Anping) were liberals with a socialist agenda. Unlike Yan Fu, their proclivity for "positive freedom" was derived from a deep-seated concern with the welfare of the poor and the exploited, rather than an epistemological optimism from the Confucian tradition. More important, their attempt at building "social democracy" in China was based on a critique of organised capitalism that was much more monopolistic, pervasive, and exploitative than the laissez-faire capitalism of Yan Fu's times.

10 In addition to missing the complex history of Chinese liberalism since World War I, Huang also ignores home-grown liberal thought that is not explicitly tied to Western liberalism. If indeed part of Yan Fu's liberalism was "largely continuous with the Chinese tradition" (p. xxiv), it makes sense that some Chinese liberals should choose to express their liberalism in a language drawn from Chinese tradition. One possible candidate for home-grown liberal thought is the New Confucianism (*xin ru jia*) of Xiong Shili, Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, and Xu Fuguan. Although perceived in certain circles as complicit with the authoritarian state,[2] the philosophical foundation of New Confucianism rests on the Mencian notion of a self-sufficient individual who is the master of his/her actions. More important, the self-sufficient individual has the moral autonomy to challenge the social and political authorities because he/she is connected with the universe through practicing what Mou Zongsan calls "moral metaphysics." Of course, the self-sufficient moral individual in New Confucianism is not the same as the self-motivated citizen in Mill's liberal society. Nevertheless, there is a common thread centring on the autonomy of the individual vis-à-vis social and political restrictions.

11 Aside from overly investing in Yan Fu's typicality, Huang succeeds in giving us a contemporary look at Yan Fu as we witness "a return of liberalism and social democracy" in a more prosperous and confident China.[3] The Yan Fu we see in *The Meaning of Freedom* is an original thinker of global vision who draws freely from the Eastern and Western traditions. Unlike the May Fourth cultural iconoclasts of the 1920s and 1930s, and the Communist ideologues of the 1950s and 1960s, Yan Fu did not emphasise Western thought at the expense of Confucianism, nor did he blindly accept state-centred Confucian orthodoxy without questioning its lack of interest in protecting individual rights. As Huang elegantly puts it, we see in Yan Fu a determination "to synthesize two equally irresistible and precious ideals: a picture of freedom, prosperity, and power offered by the liberal west, and a vision of morality, altruism, and social harmony rooted in the Confucian tradition" (p. 259). Today, as China rapidly becomes diverse and complex due to economic growth, we celebrate Yan Fu's courage in finding a middle path between individual freedom and social harmony.

NOTES

1. Edmund S.K. Fung, "State building, capitalist development, and social justice: Social democracy in China's modern transformation, 1921-1949," *Modern China* 31: 3 (July 2005), pp. 318-352. See also, "Socialism, capitalism, and democracy in Republican China: The political thought of Zhang Dongsun," *Modern China* 28: 4 (October 2002), pp. 399-431; Young-tsu Wong, "The fate of liberalism in revolutionary China: Chu Anping and his circle," 1946-1950, *Modern China* 19: 4 (October 1993), pp. 457-490

2. Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, pp. 64-71. For another view of *Xin ru jia*, see Song Xianlin, "Reconstructing the Confucian ideal in 1980s China: The 'cultural craze' and new Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 81-104; John Makeham, *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in*

Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Asia Center, 2008, pp. 99-170.

3. Feng Chongyi, "The return of liberalism and social democracy: Breaking through the barriers of state capitalism, nationalism, and cynicism in contemporary China," *Issues & Studies* 39: 3 (September 2003), pp. 1-32; Xudong Zhang, "The making of the post-Tiananmen intellectual field: A critical overview," in *Whither China: Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 1-75; Geremie R. Barmé, "The revolution of resistance," in *Social Change in Contemporary China: Conflict and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 198-200.